



ROBIN

MYTH, HISTORY & CULTURE

HOOD

NICK RENNISON

Robin Hood is England's greatest folk hero. Everyone knows the story of the outlaw who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. Nick Rennison's highly entertaining book begins with the search for the historical Robin. Was there ever a real Robin Hood? Rennison looks at the candidates who have been proposed over the years, from petty thieves to Knights Templar, before moving on to examine the many ways in which Robin Hood has been portrayed in literature and on the screen.

He began as the hero of dozens and dozens of late medieval ballads. He appeared in plays by contemporaries of Shakespeare. In the Romantic era Robin was reinvented by Walter Scott as a Saxon champion in the struggle against the Normans. During the nineteenth century, he emerged as a hero in children's literature. More recently he has been portrayed as everything from proto-socialist man of the people to anarchist thug. In the cinema he put in an appearance as early as 1908 and Douglas Fairbanks and then Errol Flynn turned him into the typical hero of Hollywood swashbucklers. In the last twenty years, Kevin Costner and Russell Crowe have provided their own very different interpretations of the character. On the small screen, Robin has been the hero of half-a-dozen TV shows from the 1950s series starring Richard Greene, which used many writers blacklisted by Hollywood, via the well remembered *Robin of Sherwood* in the 1980s to the recent BBC series.

As the twenty-first century marches through its second decade, Robin Hood is still very much with us. He is the subject of graphic novels and computer games. New films are in the offing. Robin is an archetypal hero who, it seems, can never die. This engaging book charts his life so far.

Nick Rennison has worked as a bookseller, editor and writer for many years. He has edited ~~*Waterstone's Guide to Ideas*, *The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide* and *The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide to Crime Fiction*~~, is the author of *The London Blue Plaque Guide*, has edited an anthology entitled *Poets on Poets*, and is the author of *Sherlock Holmes: The Unauthorised Biography* and *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*. He is also the author of the Pocket Essentials on [Freud and Psychoanalysis](#) and [Roget](#).

Robin Hood

Myth, History and Culture

Nick Rennison

POCKET ESSENTIALS

Other Pocket Essentials by this author:

Freud & Psychoanalysis

Roget – the Man Who Became a Book

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Introduction

In Julian Barnes's satirical novel *England, England*, a media magnate who is intent on turning the Isle of Wight into one gigantic theme park celebrating 'Englishness' commissions his marketing men to come up with a list of the fifty subjects most associated with the word 'England'. Robin Hood and His Merrie Men comes seventh on the list, behind the Royal Family, Big Ben and Manchester United Football Club but well ahead of Shakespeare, Stonehenge and the Beefeaters at the Tower of London. Robin and Co duly become one of the theme park's most popular attractions. Barnes is, of course, exaggerating for comic effect but he is right in highlighting the continuing significance of the famous outlaw. More than six hundred years after he first appeared in a handful of medieval poems, he is a worldwide cultural figure who represents particular ideas about England and Englishness. Start looking for him and Robin Hood is everywhere. There are Robin Hood novels and Robin Hood films, Robin Hood comics and Robin Hood computer games. He can be found in TV series, operas, musicals, pantomimes, graphic novels, cartoons and comedy shows. As the scholar Lorenz Potter has written, 'it is difficult to find a medium in which Robin Hood has not been represented'. He is at the heart of a tourist industry in Nottinghamshire, the county which claims him as its own, and he has an airport named after him. His fame is such that mere mention of his name in a newspaper headline ensures that readers know what to expect from the story. Call a proposed fiscal measure a 'Robin Hood' tax, for example, and everybody knows what its redistributive aim will be.

The story of the 'good outlaw', the person who breaks the laws of the land but nonetheless epitomises a sense of fairness that is not necessarily encoded in those laws, is a familiar figure in many cultures. There are Robin Hood-like characters from around the world (Juraj Janosik in Slovakia, Chucho el Roto in Mexico, Kobus van der Schlossen in Holland) but there is only one Robin Hood. As hero, trickster and mythological embodiment of a justice beyond that of the law, he stands alone.

Because of his great fame, we assume we know who Robin Hood was. Ask people in the street about him and a composite picture of the outlaw will soon start to emerge. He lived in the time of Richard the Lionheart and Prince John. He was a man who returned from the Crusades and was driven into exile in the forest by the treachery of others. He was a Saxon who fought against the tyranny of the Normans. He was a nobleman reduced to poverty and outlawry by the loss of his lands, stolen from him by villains like the Sheriff of Nottingham. Accompanied by faithful comrades like Little John, Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck, he robbed the rich and gave to the poor. The love of his life was Maid Marian. Begin looking into the story of Robin Hood and you soon find that very little of this is true of the original outlaw of the medieval poems. The 'facts' about Robin Hood that everybody knows, those of his attributes with which people are most familiar, turn out to have developed over the centuries. The story of Robin Hood is a myth which has always been subject to change and adaptation. It still is. The fundamental reason why Robin continues to be part of our culture and other medieval outlaws like Fulk FitzWarin don't is that his legend has always been open to reinterpretation and theirs have not.

This book is an attempt to provide an introduction to Robin Hood in all his incarnations.

begins with two chapters which look at him as he was portrayed in the medieval ballads with which his story began and in the folk-plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which made him a familiar figure across Tudor England. A third chapter examines the attempts over the years to find a 'real' Robin Hood, an individual from the historical record whose exploits provided the basis for the legend. 'Robin in Literature' and 'Robin on the Screen' provide the heart of the book. Robin's story has become what it is because it has been told and re-told over and over again down the centuries. Different writers and filmmakers have approached it in different ways, adding to it and embellishing it and changing its narrative emphasis. Some of these changes have survived to form part of the familiar tale we all recognise; others have not. These two chapters trace the history of Robin in drama, poetry and fiction and of Robin in the cinema and on TV. Chapters on Robin as he has appeared in illustration and comic books and in operas and musicals, follow. Two final chapters look at the prospects for Robin's future and at the stories of the other well-known characters in the legend. This is not an academic work and it does not have footnotes but it does end with a list of suggestions for further reading which will provide more information than can be crammed into the pages of a 'Pocket Essential'.

With the exception only of the tales of King Arthur, the story of Robin Hood is the most famous of all England's legends. In many ways, it is the most appealing. It speaks to that part of us which wants to believe that justice and fairness *will* prevail in the face of tyranny. It speaks to that part of us which wants to believe that somewhere there is a place of freedom, a Sherwood Forest, where oppression cannot touch us and we can live better and more honest lives. It is a legend that has survived so long because it has always found ways to change and evolve over the years. Robin Hood has long proved himself an archetypal hero and it seems unlikely that he will die any time soon. This book charts his life so far.

Robin in the Ballads

The very first mention of rhymes of Robin Hood occurs in William Langland's long poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman* which is usually dated to 1377. It is also the very first record of the outlaw hero in literature. In the poem, the character Sloth, who is presented as a drunken and incompetent priest, remarks:

'I kan noght parfitly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre.'

In other words, the negligent Sloth doesn't know the Lord's Prayer, as he should do, but he is familiar with rhymes about Robin Hood and those about a well-known crusading aristocrat from the early thirteenth century. (Clearly stories of Robin were very popular, although the criticism of them continued. Alexander Barclay, in his translation of the German author Sebastian Brant's *The Ship of Fools*, writing more than a century after Langland, sounds a very similar note when he describes those 'so blinded with their foly/That no scriptur think the so true nor gode/As is a foolish jest of Robin Hode'.) What exactly these rhymes were, we cannot be certain. The very first piece of Robin Hood verse to survive is a fragment in a manuscript dating from the early fifteenth century that is now in Lincoln Cathedral. This reads:

'Robin Hood in scherewod stod
Hodud and hathud, hosut and schod
Ffour and thurti arrows he bar in his hondus'

'Robin Hood in Sherwood stood
Hooded and hatted, hosed and shod
Four and thirty arrows he bore in his hands'

Idly scribbled by some anonymous scribe, this may well be the formulaic opening to a Robin Hood poem but nothing more of it exists.

The first ballads that survive in full date from later in the same century. Of these, the longest by far is *A Gest of Robyn Hode* which is first recorded in a printed form in the early 1500s but was certainly written some decades before that. Most scholars today would place its composition in the 1450s or 1460s, although it probably incorporates themes and motifs from earlier, lost works. Consisting of just over 1,800 lines, divided into eight sections known as 'fittes', the poem recounts a series of Robin's adventures which begin when his men bring a melancholy knight to dine with him in the woods. The knight owes money to St. Mary's Abbey in York which he cannot pay and, as a consequence, he is in danger of forfeiting his land and estates to the abbey. Robin takes pity on him and agrees to lend him the money he needs. The knight is able to pay off his debt and thwart the land-grabbing attempts of the greedy clerics. Now all he has to do is save up to pay back Robin. Meanwhile Little John, under the alias of 'Reynolde Grenelef', has joined the service of the 'proude sherif of Notingham' and one day he gets into a fight with the sheriff's cook. After swapping might

blows, the two men become friends and both decamp from the castle with large amounts of the sheriff's goods and cash. John returns only to tempt the sheriff into the forest where he is ambushed and forced to agree to terms with the outlaws.

Robin is now beginning to wonder about the knight who owes him money. The scheduled day for payment has arrived. Robin sends out his men to look for his debtor but they find only two monks from St. Mary's Abbey. When they lie about the amount of money they are carrying, the outlaws take possession of it and, when the knight does turn up, Robin decides that he has had enough return on his outlay from the monks. He frees the knight of his debt. The enraged sheriff, intent on revenge, later learns of the knight's involvement with the outlaws and takes him prisoner. Robin Hood and his men, outraged by what they see as a breach of the agreement made earlier, go to Nottingham, kill the sheriff and free the knight now named as Sir Richard at the Lee. The king, who has been told of Robin's exploits, decides to enter the forest disguised as an abbot in an attempt to meet him. As he expected, Robin takes him prisoner and suggests that he should both dine with the outlaws and join with them in their forest sports. When the 'abbot' tells the truth about the amount of money he is carrying with him, Robin takes only half of it. When he bests Robin in one of the games, the outlaw leader recognises the king and agrees to enter his service. He spends a year with the king but the call of the greenwood is too strong and he returns to the forest.

In the last twenty lines of the poem, the author fast-forwards through the years and briefly describes his hero's death, treacherously slain by his kinswoman the Prioress of Kirklee. (A much fuller version of the story of how Robin died is preserved in a ballad entitled 'Robin Hood's Death' which can be found in the seventeenth-century manuscript known as the *Perceval Folio*. The manuscript clearly records a tale that is much older and may indeed be one of the oldest of all the Robin Hood stories. The famous episode of Robin shooting an arrow from the window of Kirklee's Priory and asking to be buried where it falls is first found in an eighteenth-century broadside version of the ballad. It is probably a later embellishment of the original story, although it may well date back much further than the period in which it is first recorded.)

What then does the *Gest*, the most substantial of all the early Robin Hood texts, tell us about the outlaw hero? He is a yeoman not a nobleman, a fact revealed in the poem's very first stanza. Although some of the action in the *Gest* takes place in Nottingham, Robin comes from Yorkshire not Nottinghamshire. There is no Sherwood in this text. 'Robyn stode in Bernesdale', the poet unequivocally states in the third stanza. The poem opens in Barnsdale in south Yorkshire and this is made abundantly clear by references to other very specific place-names later in the poem. Indeed, the references are so specific and so localised as to suggest that the poet must have had personal knowledge of the area. His chief companions in outlawry are Little John, Much the Miller's Son and 'gode Scarlock' but he has up to 'seven score' of other followers. Robin is a religious man with a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary but he has little or no time for bishops and other members of the higher clergy. The monarch at the time of the action in the *Gest* is not Richard or John but 'Edward, our comly kynge'.

Further information can be gleaned from the handful of shorter ballads which date from about the same period as the *Gest*. 'Robin Hood and the Potter', which survives in a manuscript from about 1500, shows Robin as trickster, disguising himself as a potter to travel into Nottingham and sell his wares. One of his customers is the Sheriff's wife who is so delighted by the bargain she gets on the pots she buys that she invites Robin to dine with her husband. The supposed potter wins an archery contest against the Sheriff's men and, telling

his host that he knows the outlaw Robin Hood, he persuades him to travel from the safety of the town into the wilds of the greenwood. There he and his men dispossess the Sheriff of his goods and send him back to Nottingham with his tail between his legs where he faces the scorn and mockery of his wife. 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne' is first found in a seventeenth-century collection but elements in it closely echo a play from 1475 and it must date back to the late fifteenth century. It introduces the character who has, over the centuries, been Robin's most regular opponent other than the Sheriff of Nottingham. This lively and unashamedly violent ballad has Robin and Little John encountering Sir Guy of Gisborne in the 'merry greenwood'. The two outlaws have an argument. John departs to Barnsdale and leaves Robin with Guy who has been hired to kill the outlaw by the Sheriff but does not immediately recognise his prey. He and Robin compete at archery and, when the outlaw wins and identifies himself, they fight to the death. Robin kills his opponent and, cutting off Guy's head, he sticks it 'on his bowes end'. He then takes his 'Irish kniffe' and mutilates the face. Meanwhile Little John has been captured by the Sheriff and faces execution until Robin, now disguised as Guy, approaches and frees his comrade. The Sheriff tries to flee but 'Little John with an arrow broade/Did cleave his heart in twinn'.

'Robin Hood and the Monk', which can be found in a manuscript at Cambridge University that dates from about 1450, may well be the oldest of all surviving tales of the outlaw. In it Robin, anxious to attend mass, travels to Nottingham where a 'gret-hedid munke' (a large-headed monk) recognises him and tells the Sheriff of his presence in the town. The outlaw is captured. Little John and Much the Miller's Son, when they learn what has happened, determine to rescue their master. They encounter the monk and his page. John kills the monk (he 'smote of the munkis hed') and Much does the same to the page for fear the boy would be a witness against them. They take letters from the monk and deliver them to the king who accepts their story that the monk died a natural death. The king now charges John and Much with the task of travelling to Nottingham to bring Robin to him. With the king's blessing they have little trouble in getting into the prison where their leader is being held. They kill the jailer and free Robin.

Even the briefest summaries of 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne' and 'Robin Hood and the Monk' reveal an important fact about these early ballads. One of the most striking elements of them is their casual violence. Although Robin and his followers are capable of courtesy and generosity, and they have, in their own way, a rather strict code of justice and morality, they are also men with no qualms about killing their enemies and mutilating their bodies after doing so. As the historian Maurice Keen has written, 'In the ballads, we are up against a full-blooded medieval brigand.' Nor were the men who created the ballads particularly troubled by this. The violence is described in very much the same casual, off-handed way in which it is committed.

Other old ballads about Robin exist – close to thirty of them – but none has the same age and provenance as the *Gest* and the handful of other, shorter works just described. Many of them undoubtedly incorporate early material but it is impossible to trace it back to its original sources. The ballads which survive from the seventeenth century do so in a variety of forms. Some are found in manuscripts. The so-called *Percy Folio*, a huge compilation of old ballads and poetry of all kinds, is written in a seventeenth-century hand but has material in it that dates back centuries before that. It contains the first surviving texts of some of the best-known Robin ballads including 'Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar', an introduction to the character later known as Friar Tuck, and 'Robin Hood Rescuing Will Stutly'. Some appeared as broadsides.

printed on a single sheet of paper and sold in the city streets and at markets and fairs. Some were produced as chapbooks, pocket-sized booklets designed to be sold by the travelling pedlars known as chapmen. Over the years they were accumulated by collectors intrigued by these examples of popular culture (the diarist Samuel Pepys was one avid enthusiast) or they were gathered together in what were known as 'garlands', short anthologies of ballads from different sources. The first major, scholarly attempt to bring all the known ballads together in one book was made by a man named Joseph Ritson in 1795.

Some of these later ballads probably date back in their entirety far further than their first appearance in print or preserved manuscript. Others re-work or make use of themes and motifs from the earlier ballads. As on an archaeological site, a little digging can soon unearth elements of older structures. Look beneath the surface of 'Robin Hood and the Butcher', a ballad which first survives in the seventeenth-century *Percy Folio*, and it is clear that it is derived from 'Robin Hood and the Potter', a ballad which may well date back to the 1460s. In both works, Robin is the trickster figure, who takes possession of a tradesman's wares (the potter's pots, the butcher's meat) and sells them at ridiculously low prices. In both, he first feasts with the Sheriff and then fools him into accompanying him back to Sherwood. Then the representative of the law is captured when Robin summons his men. He is only released because of the hospitality his wife had extended to the outlaw when he was disguised as a tradesman.

The stories told in the other ballads are various and wide-ranging. Some, such as the tale of 'Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar', have become part of the tradition and have appeared under assorted guises in dozens of books and films; others have failed to catch readers' imaginations and have never been repeated in later works. A few stray (usually unsuccessfully) from the standard territory of Barnsdale and Sherwood. In 'Robin Hood and the Prince of Aragon', for example, the outlaw leader, together with Little John and Will Scadlock, travels to London where the eponymous prince is besieging the city with the help of two giants. There Robin and his men take on the three villains of the piece and slay them in combat. Elements of more fantastical romances are uneasily welded to the down-to-earth tradition of the Robin Hood myth. In 'Robin Hood's Fishing', the setting is once again an unusual one but this ballad retains some of the feel of those which take place on more familiar ground. Self-confessedly 'weary of the woods' and the 'chasing of the fallow deer', Robin decides to leave them and set up as a fisherman in Scarborough. He proves useless at his new trade but, when the fishing vessels are raided by French pirates, he comes into his own. Bound to the main mast so he can aim properly amidst the rolling of the sea, Robin despatches Frenchman after Frenchman with his bow and eventually the fishermen board the pirate ship and take possession of 'twelve hundred pounds in gold so bright'.

There are recurring themes and motifs in these ballads. Robin regularly comes across some traveller in the forest and, almost invariably, he offers to fight with him. This happens in 'Robin Hood and the Ranger', 'Robin Hood and the Shepherd', 'Robin Hood and the Tinke' and several more. Almost invariably, Robin is beaten. The outlaw hero then invites the man who has bested him to join the band of merry men. Nearly anyone who has seen a Robin Hood film in the past seventy years has seen a version of this 'Robin Meets His Match' encounter but all the versions ultimately derive from the ballads. However, it is not just strangers who end up quarrelling in the greenwood. In the ballads, the outlaws themselves are always falling out with one another. Robin and Little John are forever setting off on journeys

through the woods, having words and going their separate ways to meet with separate adventures.

Disguise and the adoption of another's identity also have significant roles to play in many of the ballads. Robin frequently appears as a trickster figure who disguises himself to fool and undermine authority, usually in the shape of the Sheriff of Nottingham. As we have seen, this occurs in the earliest of the stories such as 'Robin Hood and the Potter' but it is also a key element in many of the later ones as well. In 'Robin Hood Rescues Three Young Men', for example, the outlaw pretends to be the hangman in order to thwart the Sheriff's plan to hang 'three squires in Nottingham town' who have committed no crime other than the killing of the king's deer. Finally, the forest itself is of huge importance to the Robin Hood ballads. As a place where the normal rules of society do not apply and where the social hierarchy can so easily be overturned, Sherwood (or Barnsdale) is a realm of new possibilities for those who, like Robin, choose to live in it.

For anyone familiar with Robin Hood largely through movies and TV, or even through any one of the dozens of children's books based on the character that have appeared in the last hundred years, the outlaw of the ballads can come as a bit of a surprise. He isn't a gentleman fallen on hard times, forced into the greenwood by his loyalty to Richard the Lionheart, nor has he ever fought with the king in the Crusades. He doesn't even live in the time of Richard the Lionheart. The king in the ballads, if he is mentioned at all, is called Edward. Robin is happy enough to rob the rich but he doesn't appear to have any particular desire to hand over his spoils to the poor. (Although the *Gest* shows his generosity to the poor knight Sir Richard at the Lee and ends with lines assuring readers that he 'dyde pore men moch god [good]') He's actually a violent and aggressive man who has no qualms about mutilating a dead man's face with his knife. The goodies in the stories aren't stalwart Saxons and the baddies nasty Normans. There is no hint whatsoever of any ethnic struggle between Saxons and Normans. Except in one later ballad that may have been deliberately written to add an element to the tradition that wasn't previously there, Robin doesn't have a Sherwood romance with a lovely lady known as Maid Marian. In fact, he rarely has any lovely lady friend at all.

And yet these early ballads do contain familiar foundations of the Robin Hood story on which later generations have built ever more elaborate narrative structures. Robin's principal friends and allies (Little John, Will Scarlet, Much the Miller's Son) are all to be found in them. So too are the villains and enemies associated with Robin, most notably the Sheriff of Nottingham and Sir Guy of Gisbourne. The location in many of the ballads is Nottingham and/or Sherwood Forest, although a handful of them, particularly the earliest, mention Barnsdale and other Yorkshire place names. There are themes and motifs in the ballads – Robin meeting his match, Robin playing the trickster, Robin being rescued from imprisonment or rescuing others from imprisonment – that would be immediately recognised by fans of, say, the recent BBC TV series about the outlaw leader. Look again at *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, by far the longest and possibly the oldest of all the Robin Hood ballads that we have. There are elements in its narrative that have lasted throughout the centuries. The archery contest appears in various guises in works as different as *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott's novel of 1819, and Disney's 1973 animated feature film entitled *Robin Hood*. The story of the impoverished knight Sir Richard at the Lee and his debt to the Abbey of St. Mary's is still being re-enacted 500 years later in episodes of the 1950s TV series starring Richard Greene. Robin of the ballads is still with us.

Robin in the May Games

The ballads played a central role in keeping alive the stories of Robin Hood for hundreds of years, from the time of Langland to the time of Sir Walter Scott, but there is a good argument to be made that, for at least two of those centuries, Robin Hood was best-known throughout England in the plays, games, revels and pageants which featured him as a character. For various reasons, Robin became a central figure in the tradition of folk-drama that was particularly associated with the May Games played throughout the country at Whitsuntide. Like Morris men and the summer lord, he was part of the ritualistic fabric of the English year. The very first reference to Robin which relates to these games dates to 1427, at least twenty years before the earliest possible date for any of the surviving ballads. In the municipal records for the city of Exeter for that year, there is an entry detailing the 20d that was paid *ludoribus ludentibus lusum Robyn Hode*, in other words 'for the players playing the game of Robin Hood'. For the next two hundred years, these players seem to have been familiar figures in communities throughout southern England, the south Midlands and Scotland. (Curiously, almost no evidence survives for them from the very areas – the north and the north Midlands – where the Robin Hood stories are set. Nor is there much recorded activity in East Anglia apart from one major reference discussed below.) There are more than a hundred surviving records in parish accounts and the like of instances of these Robin Hood games. In Bristol in 1525, we hear of the purchase of 'two pair of hosyn for Robin Hood and Lytyll John'; in 1536, a parish in Cornwall receives a sum of money from 'John Marys and his company that playd Robin Hoode'; in Yeovil between the 1510s and 1570s there are more than twenty records of both outgoings (for such things as the refeathering of Robin Hood's arrows and ribbon lace for Little John's horn) and the receipt of charitable donations; in Leicester in 1527 there is a reference to money owed to St. Leonard's Church after a Robin Hood play was acted for its benefit; and eight years earlier and much further north, in Edinburgh, a man is told in a letter that 'Francis Boithwell your nichtbour is chosin to be Litoljohn for to mak sport and jocositeis in the toun'.

These were clearly regular and familiar events through large swathes of the country and Robin Hood was not just popular with ordinary villagers and townsfolk. He was also popular amongst the gentry. The Paston Letters is the name generally given to a large collection of family letters and papers connected to the Pastons of East Anglia, a family rising up the social ladder in the fifteenth century, the period covered in the correspondence. Amongst the Paston Letters is one from 1473 in which Sir John Paston, then head of the family, refers to a servant whom he has kept for three years 'to pleye Seynt Jorge and Robynhod and the shryff of Notyngham'. The man has now left his employ and Sir John is not best pleased about his departure. Clearly Paston was accustomed to stage Robin Hood plays (and plays involving St. George) in his own household and this particular servant, named as W. Woode and presumably a particularly effective actor, will be missed when they are next performed.

The very play in which W. Woode might well have acted has survived in fragmentary form as a manuscript, now in the library of Trinity College, which, in all likelihood, was once part of an archive of Paston family documents. Usually known as 'Robyn Hod and the Shryff

Nottingham', the drama consists of a mere 21 lines. In the original manuscript there is no division into scenes or any indication of which characters speak which lines but a narrative sorts can be extrapolated from what we have. It has clear similarities to the ballad 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne'. In a first scene, a knight is commissioned by the Sheriff to capture Robin. The unnamed knight and the outlaw meet and compete against one another in various activities including archery and wrestling. The two then fight with swords and Robin wins, cutting off his opponent's head. In a second scene, Robin and some of his men have been captured and the other outlaws, including Friar Tuck (appearing in the literature for the first time), must effect their rescue. It's a lot to fit into 21 lines and it is clear that these Robin Hood folk dramas depended for their impact not on the spoken word but on boisterous action and plenty of it. Other texts of May Games plays have survived. One of the sixteenth-century printings of the *Gest* also includes two short dramatic texts which, according to the man who printed them, 'are very proper to be played in Maye Games'. The first depicts Robin's initial meeting with Friar Tuck, a story also told in a ballad entitled 'Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar'. However, the play text pre-dates the first surviving version of the ballad by a century. The second text shares some of the elements of the ballad 'Robin Hood and the Potter' and is another version of the story, re-told many times and with many variations, in which Robin meets his match in a fight with a stranger in the greenwood. Although these are longer by far than 'Robyn Hod and the Shryff of Nottingham' (together they amount to just over 200 lines), they also clearly indicate that the dramas in the May Games depended far more on action than they did on words.

At the height of the popularity of the May Games, even the king might play at Robin Hood. The royal court, just as much as the village green or the city street, could be the setting for such revels. In Edward Hall's *Chronicle* there is an account of Henry VIII and his courtiers imitating the pursuits of lesser folk by indulging in Robin Hood games. On May Day in 1511, according to Hall, Henry, together with the earls of Essex and Wiltshire and other noblemen, burst into the Queen's chamber, 'all appareled in short cotes of Kentish Kendal, with hodes of their heddes, and hosen of the same, everyone of them with his bowe and arrowes, and sworde and buckler, like outlawes, or Robyn Hodes men.'

What was the purpose of these games when they were played not by king and courtiers but by ordinary townsfolk and villagers? Despite the fact that Robin was an anti-authority figure, metaphorically sticking up two fingers to the forces of law and the higher echelons of the church, there is no indication that they represented popular resistance to authority. They sometimes ended in riots and violence, amidst all the drink and excitement that accompanied them, but they were not intended to trouble the social order. In fact, they were usually organised by village or town officials and substantial amounts of public money were lavished on them. Surviving records from Kingston upon Thames show just how much was spent on ensuring that the players were well-costumed. In 1508, the sizeable sum of 12s 10d was forked out for Kendal green cloth to make coats for the two men taking the roles of Robin and Little John. Ten years later, Robin's retinue had clearly increased and the old coats had grown threadbare. Another fourteen were commissioned to replace them.

Yet the Kingston authorities and others like them, through their generosity, were speculating in the hope of accumulating. For the prime purpose of the Robin Hood play-games seems to have been fundraising. In the course of the day's entertainment, Robin and Little John, Friar Tuck and Maid Marian (often played by a man in drag) processed through town or village

stopping from time to time to perform their mini-dramas but devoting much of their energies to the gathering of money from fellow citizens. Robin was not taking from the rich to give to the poor but from the individual to give to the community. Most often the money went to the churchwardens to be devoted to communal projects. In Croscombe in Somerset, there are records from the 1480s to the 1510s of sums ranging from 23s 8d to £3 6s 8d received as 'Roben Hode money' or as a result of 'the sport of Robart Hode and hys company' or designated as coming, in some way, from the Robin Hood games in May. In Yeovil in 1544 £5 8s 9½d was received from 'John Delagryse being R Hood this yere'. Further north in Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire in 1556, townwardens' accounts include 29s 8d gathered by a man named Steven Shaw and his company for their 'Robyn Hood playe' performed for the last two years. And, in Kingston itself, outlay on costumes was more than justified by the returns recorded by the churchwardens. From 1506 to the late 1530s sums ranging from 12s up to £5 6s 8d are described in the accounts as received for 'ye gaderyng of Robyn Hode' or in similar words.

Despite the connection with charitable gathering and good works, church disapproval of Robin Hood and the May Games was growing by the middle decades of the sixteenth century. In increasingly Protestant times, these popular rituals and sports smacked too much of Catholic laxity and the papist past. In a sermon delivered before Edward VI in 1549, Bishop Hugh Latimer recalled an incident years previously in which his own attempts to preach in a church he was visiting had been thwarted by popular enthusiasm for the outlaw. 'Sir, this is a busy day with us, we cannot hear you,' one of the parishioners had told him, 'it is Robin Hood's day. The parish are gone abroad to gather for Robin Hood.' More than a decade later the bishop was still fuming. 'It is no laughing matter, my friends,' he thundered, perhaps suspecting that some people would indeed find it a laughing matter, 'it is a weeping matter, a heavy matter; a heavy matter, under the pretence of gathering for Robin Hood, a traitor and thief, to put out a preacher, to have his office less esteemed; to prefer Robin Hood before the ministration of God's word.' Attempts were made to repress Robin Hood activities in the May Games. In 1528, the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports issued an edict banning Robin Hood games in the towns he controlled; nearly thirty years later and several hundred miles further north, the Scottish parliament even went so far as to pass a statute to prevent people from performing the plays. It failed to work. In 1561, the fearsome kirk leader John Knox noted that people were still gathering in Edinburgh 'efter the auld wickett manner of Robyn Hoode' and that, although the practice had been condemned, 'yet would they not be forbidden, but would disobey and trouble the town'. The trouble ended in a riot when one of the Robin Hood revellers was arrested and his fellows descended on the Tolbooth to free him.

And yet, despite the disapproval of the authorities, the old traditions were still much in evidence. The Tudor diarist Henry Machyn, a clothier in London, refers to May Games in the capital in 1559 which included 'Robyn Hode and Lytyll John... and Frere Tuke' alongside 'Sar Gorge and the Dragon' and 'the mores dansse'. Outside the capital, records of Robin Hood continue to be found. In Barnstaple in Devon, in the same year that Machyn was watching the May Games, 3s 4d was 'paid to Robart Hode for his pastime' and the Yeovil records mention Robin well into the 1570s. In Kent in 1574, younger members of the aristocratic Sidney family were charitably doling out cash to players performing in Robin Hood plays. It is only with the general decline of such rituals and folk dramas in the last decades of the sixteenth century that Robin Hood play-games finally begin to disappear from the records. Even then,

remoter and more conservative regions such as Cornwall, Robin of the May Games could still flourish. There are records of Robin Hood costumes in the town of St. Columb Major in 1588 and of the gathering of 'Robin hoodes monyes' six years later. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the assumption may be that such age-old sports were finally gone but the odd reference suggests that there were pockets of the country where Robin still held sway from time to time. He is mentioned in a processional May-game in Wells in 1607 and, at Woodstock in Oxfordshire in 1627, there is a record of £7 7s 1d brought in by Robin Hood and Little John which sounds little different to entries in parish accounts from a hundred years earlier. The most surprising record, and the one most difficult to explain, dates from as late as 1652. In that year, villagers in Enstone in Oxfordshire were, according to the Latin account of two foreign visitors, still celebrating games 'quos sua lingua Rabben Hut vocabant' ('which in their own language, they call Rabben Hut'). Three years after the execution of Charles I, with England under the rule of the Commonwealth, Robin was somehow surviving as a character in folk drama. Perhaps, in a sense, the Robin Hood plays never died. They merely went into hibernation, awaiting the revival of interest in such folk traditions in the twentieth century.

Historical Robin

Was Robin Hood a real person? Or was he, as the historian JC Holt claims, 'a legend rather than a man'? If he was a real individual, is there any trace of him in the historical record? In some sense, the questions are superfluous. It is Robin Hood the living mythic figure who holds our attention not some long-dead medieval outlaw who may have been known by that name or a similar one. And yet the question of whether or not Robin Hood really existed is one that will not go away. Historians and pseudo-historians have been striving to answer it for centuries. One of the most distinguished scholars who ever studied the Robin Hood ballads, the American Francis J. Child, was of the opinion that anyone who made a connection between any ballad and a specific historical record must be possessed of 'an uncommon insensibility to the ludicrous' but there have been plenty of people over the years prepared to risk looking silly in the pursuit of a real Robin.

Certainly there were plenty of real-life gangs of outlaws in the Middle Ages. Eustace Folville and his younger brothers, for example, delinquent members of a gentry family, led a band of thieves and thugs who committed a series of often violent crimes in Leicestershire and Derbyshire in the 1320s and 1330s. Summoned for trial in 1326 for the murder of a local knight, the Folvilles simply headed for the hills and were declared outlaws. Over the next decade, they were responsible for most of the worst law-breaking in the Midlands. Eustace himself is mentioned in the records in connection with three robberies and four murders in the space of a few years. Despite this, there was clearly a good deal of sympathy for the Folvilles amongst ordinary people and a sense that these outlaws were more honest men than the officers of the law who pursued them. Rendered into modern English, the complaint of one official was that the Folvilles 'are aided and abetted by local people, who incite them to their evil deeds and shield them after they are done'. He could have been talking about Robin and his merry men. Thirty years after his death, Eustace Folville was still remembered as a fundamentally just man. In 1377, William Langland wrote approvingly in *Piers Plowman*, the poem in which the first mention of Robin Hood literature is made, of 'Folvyles lawes', the rough and ready justice that the brothers had embodied.

The Folvilles made no mark on literature beyond this passing reference in *Piers Plowman* but there were also real outlaws from earlier times whose lives were recorded in verse and prose. Hereward the Wake was a hero of the Saxon resistance to the Norman Conquest who defied the Conqueror's men from his stronghold on the isle of Ely. Tales of his exploits survive in a number of medieval works, most notably *Gesta Herewardi* ('The Deeds of Hereward'), the earliest copy of which dates from the middle of the thirteenth century. Fulk FitzWarin was a nobleman turned outlaw, a landowner from the Welsh Marches who rebelled against King John in the first decade of the twelfth century. His adventures are recorded in a prose romance in Old French entitled *Fouk le Fitz Waryn* which survives in a compilation of works written by a scribe in Hereford sometime between 1325 and 1340. Eustace the Monk was a Benedictine who left his monastery in about 1190 and went on to become an outlaw and pirate. He was killed in the naval Battle of Dover in 1217. Some time in the decade immediately following his death, he became the subject of *Wistasse li Moine*, a French poem.

which focuses particularly on his early career as a forest outlaw, fighting and feuding with his former lord, the count of Boulogne. All of these outlaws were undoubtedly real, historical figures and the works of literature which were written about them carry unmistakable echoes of the earliest stories of the most famous outlaw leader of them all. Clearly elements of the stories of Hereward, Fulk and Eustace found their way into the Robin Hood tradition. This does not necessarily prove that Robin, like them, was a real individual.

To some writers, beginning in the nineteenth century, Robin was most definitely not a real man but a figure from ancient mythology, one 'whose name but faintly disguises either Woden in the aspect of a vegetation deity, or a minor wood spirit Hode'. In the twentieth century folklorists such as Margaret Murray saw him as a high priest of the ancient pagan religion, a representative of the horned god of nature. Such theories, although they have been regularly revealed as based more on wishful thinking than any real evidence, refuse to go away. In the 1990s, John Matthews, a prolific explorer of the territory where mythology and new age spirituality meet, published *Robin Hood: The Green Lord of the Wildwood* in which he reaffirmed links between the outlaw leader and the ancient symbol of the Green Man which had been largely discredited decades earlier. Discarding such outré ideas may be essential in any pursuit of the real Robin Hood but it still does not necessarily involve the belief that the hero of the greenwood can be traced back to a specific individual from the Middle Ages.

So where should we look if we are in pursuit of a real Robin? It would seem as if place names that indicate a connection with the outlaw (Robin Hood's Bay on the Yorkshire coast, Robin Hood's Close in Nottingham, Robin Hood's Cave in the Creswell Crags between Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire) might provide some clues. However, the dates when these place names are first recorded reveal that they almost certainly reflect the widespread popularity of the stories in song and folklore rather than any link to a real person named Robin Hood.

What about the names of individuals most commonly associated with him in the popular imagination? Most of these can also be swiftly dismissed in the search. Despite what some twentieth-century filmmakers and TV scriptwriters would have us believe, he was not Robert Earl of Huntington. Robin makes his earliest appearances in the ballads as a yeoman not a noble and it seems that the first person to identify him as the Earl of Huntington was the Elizabethan dramatist Anthony Munday in two plays from the 1590s.

Nor was the outlaw's real name Robert of Locksley, Robin of Loxley or any of the other similar variants that have been used in dozens of books and films in the years since Walter Scott introduced his Robin Hood character as 'Locksley' in his 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*. It is true that a manuscript which forms part of the Sloane Collection in the British Museum, probably written in the late sixteenth century, is the first surviving attempt to provide a historical biography of Robin Hood and that this places him in the time of Richard I and records his birthplace as Locksley. However, there is no evidence that the writer of the 'Sloane Life' had access to records that have now been lost. Most of the rest of his biography is quite clearly constructed from material in the ballads. The Locksley birthplace is surely more likely to have come from a lost ballad than from lost historical evidence. There are other early references to Locksley as Robin's name. Roger Dodsworth, for instance, a seventeenth-century antiquarian, wrote: 'Robert Locksley, born in Bradfield parish, in Hallamshire, wounded his stepfather to death at plough: fled into the woods, and was relieved by his mother till he was discovered. Then he came to Clifton upon Calder, and came acquainted with Little John, that kept the king's

which said John is buried at Hathershead (Hathersage) in Derbyshire, where he hath a fa tomb-stone with an inscription.' Yet, since Dodsworth also goes on to refer to the possibili that it was Little John who was the Earl of Huntington, it doesn't seem as if a great deal credence can be placed on his theories.

In looking for a real Robin, the first references to him as an historical figure rather than literary one are significant. They come, perhaps surprisingly, from Scotland. Two fifteenth century Scottish chroniclers, both of them churchmen, record the outlaw's activities in the works. Andrew of Wyntoun, writing about 1420, places Robin in the year 1283. In an entry for that year in his *Orygynale Chronicle*, Andrew writes: 'Littel Iohun and Robert Hude/Waythme war commedit gud/In Ingilwode and Bernnysdaile/Thai oyssit al this tyme thar trawale'. ('Little John and Robert Hood were forest outlaws who were highly praised. In Inglewood and Barnsdale, they undertook their labour all this time.') Some twenty years later Walter Bower writing in Latin, placed Robin in the 1260s, casting him as one of the followers of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, forced into banditry after the defeat and death of the Earl at the Battle of Evesham in 1265 – 'Then arose the famous murderer (*siccarius*, literally 'cut-throat Robert Hood, as well as Little John, together with their accomplices from among the disinherited, whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both tragedies and comedies, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing above all other ballads.' It is worth noting that neither Andrew of Wyntoun nor Walter Bower mentions Nottinghamshire. Andrew places him in Barnsdale in Yorkshire and further north in Inglewood, probably an area near Carlisle. And neither of them puts Robin in the period with which later generations have come to associate him – the reign of Richard I – but nearly a hundred years later.

The first historian to associate the outlaw with Richard the Lionheart was another Scotsman named John Major, author of a *History of Great Britain*, originally written in Latin, and published in 1521. Major also played a significant role in the process of transforming Robin from yeoman outlaw to a man of gentility and humanity. 'Robert Hood, an Englishman, and Little John,' he wrote, not only 'lay in wait in the woods' but they also 'spoiled of their goods those only that were wealthy'. These were not just bloody cutthroats. 'They took the life of no man, unless he either attacked them or offered resistance in defence of his property.' Robin was basically, in Major's eyes, a decent chap. 'He would allow no woman to suffer injustice nor would he spoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from the abbots.' In short, Robin Hood was – there was no getting away from it – a robber but 'of all robbers he was the humanest and the chief'.

As the sixteenth century progressed, other antiquarians, including famous names like John Leland, sometimes called 'the father of English local history', and John Stow, the author of *Survey of London*, tended to repeat what Major had said and the association of Robin with the reigns of Richard I and John began to gather strength. For close to two hundred years there were few significant developments in the story of the search for an historical Robin. As we have seen, a prose life of the outlaw, dating from about 1600, was preserved in the Sloane Manuscripts but it is merely constructed from ballads, folk plays and tradition. Even for centuries ago, it seems that there was little hard historical evidence to hand. One of the traditions that existed was that Robin Hood's Grave could be seen in Kirkstall in Yorkshire where there was certainly a stone that was linked to the outlaw. It was described by the antiquarian William Camden in 1607 and drawn by a local doctor named Nathaniel Johnstone

sixty years later. Forty years after Johnston, the Dean of York, Thomas Gale, not only recorded a date for Robin's death which he claimed was on the grave (the improbable 2 Kalends of December 1247) but also some lines from a verse epitaph. 'Hear underneath the laitl stean/Laid Robert earl of Huntington/Nea arcir vir as hei sae geud/An pipl kauld im robb heud.' Presumably this was some kind of clerical joke since this gibberish bears no relation to any form of Middle English and the scholarly Gale must have known this. He seems to have taken the verse from Martin Parker's *A True Tale of Robin Hood* from 1632 and turned it into cod medieval English for fun. The joke took on a life of its own when, sometime in the eighteenth century, the words were carved onto another stone slab near Kirklees which is still there.

Probably not intended as a joke but no less ludicrous than Gale's epitaph was the family tree constructed for Robin Hood by the eccentric antiquarian William Stukeley. In 1741 Stukeley took the genuine pedigree of a series of medieval earls of Huntington and inserted into it some names which, as far as one can tell, he had simply made up. He invented a family of Fitzooths and proudly stated at the bottom of this false pedigree that one of them, Robert Fitzooth, was 'commonly called Robin Hood' and was the 'pretended earl of Huntington'. Quite what Stukeley's motives were in creating Robin's family tree are unclear but he had a track record in holding barmy ideas about the past. He was genuinely a major figure in the history of the development of British archaeology and one of the first people to investigate Stonehenge in anything approaching a scientific fashion but he was also the proponent of some markedly offbeat theories. His local patriotism was such that he decided that Stamford in Lincolnshire, the county of his birth, was a seat of learning far older than Oxford and Cambridge. In fact, he argued there had been a university there in the ninth century BC, founded by Bladud, the legendary king of Britain who also established the city of Bath. One of his contemporaries described Stukeley as a mixture of 'simplicity, drollery, absurdity, ingenuity, superstition and antiquarianism' and the kindest assumption about his ideas on Robin Hood's ancestry is that in constructing the family tree, he demonstrated his simplicity and superstition rather more than he did his ingenuity and antiquarianism.

Not much reliance should have been placed on Stukeley's 'researches' at all but, alas, people continued to do so for decades after his death. (Some people even do so today.) In 1864, an antiquarian and prolific dramatist named JR Planché published a paper entitled 'Ramble with Robin Hood' in which he argued that Stukeley had got the name 'Fitzooth' wrong and that it should have been 'Fitzodo'. There was a Fitzodo family in records from the late twelfth century which traced its descent from Bishop Odo, William the Conqueror's half brother and a man who had paid little attention to any notions of priestly chastity. Planché speculated that the 'Fitz', which implied illegitimacy, had been dropped from the name and that some members of the family had called themselves simply 'Odo' or 'Ode'. He even found a Robert Fitzodo in the 1190s who could have been 'Robert Ode' or Robin Hood. In truth, of course, Planché was barking up the wrong tree by paying any attention whatsoever to Stukeley's absurd pedigree but he must have been further excited because the Fitzodos at the time were lords of the manor of Loxley, a village in Warwickshire.

So far we have only considered the slow development of past ideas about Robin's historical reality and the names of those proposed can be readily dismissed. What about candidates for the 'real' Robin Hood whose case can still be argued? One of the strongest of these was first put forward in 1852, twelve years before Planché went off on his rambles with 'Robert Ode

Joseph Hunter was a Yorkshireman who became an assistant keeper at the Public Record Office. Fascinated by the old ballads of Robin Hood, he decided to see whether or not there was anything in the medieval records which supported the story told in the *Gest*. He noted that the king in the *Gest* is named as 'Edwarde, our comly kyng' and that this king is on progress through the north during events described in the poem. Hunter decided that the only king this could be was Edward II who was indeed journeying through the north of England between April and November of 1323. Furthermore, the following year, a Robert or Robyn Hood appears in the service of Edward II. Perhaps, Hunter thought, this man could be the same Robert Hode who appears in the Court Rolls of Wakefield, close to Barnsdale, in 1311 and 1317. He constructed a plausible enough story to fit his man with some of the narrative supplied in the *Gest*. So far Hunter was on relatively firm evidential ground but he went on rather more shakily, to argue that the man must have been a supporter of the uprising by Thomas, Earl of Lancaster against Edward II and that he had become an outlaw after Lancaster's rebels had been defeated at the Battle of Boroughbridge in 1322. The records are those of a man who has returned to the king's favour after a period of exile. Although there are huge gaps in the evidence Hunter used, his theory does have points in its favour and has been revisited several times since he first proposed it. It has, for instance, been repeated as if it was an astonishing revelation, in the 1995 book *Robin Hood: The Man Behind the Myth* by Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman.

Since Hunter first ventured into the medieval records in search of a man called Hood, many others have followed in his wake and many other potential Robins have emerged. Some date back much further than Robert Hood of Wakefield and there is a good argument that the earlier the Hood the more likely he is to be the right man. The first mention of Robin Hood in rhymes dates from the 1370s, only half a century after Hunter's Hood was alive. Go back a little further and there is more time for the legend to have developed. One of the most promising of all candidates for the real 'Robin' dates back a century before Robert Hood of Wakefield. He was first put forward by a local historian named LVD Owen in 1936 who found him in the records of York Assizes for 1225–26. They refer to a 'Robert Hod' who is described as 'fugitivus' and state that the chattels left behind by this man were worth 32s 6d. The same name (or variants of it such as 'Robert Hood' and 'Hobbehod') appears in later entries in the same records and can be safely assumed to refer to the same man. He is the only man found in the records with the right name who was almost certainly an outlaw. It is difficult to see what else the word 'fugitivus' could mean other than that he was on the run from the law.

However, this Yorkshire fugitive is only one of a number of men with the name of 'Robert Hod' or something very similar that diligent researchers have unearthed in medieval records. There is a 'Robert Hod' who was a servant of a Gloucestershire abbot. He was in trouble in the reign of King John after killing one Ralf of Cirencester. Another 'Robert Hod' was among rebels supporting Simon de Montfort who took refuge on the Isle of Ely in the 1260s. Two more Yorkshire Robert Hods fell foul of the law, one in the 1250s and one in the following decade. Move on to the fourteenth century and there is a 'Robyn Hod' serving as an archer at a garrison on the Isle of Wight and yet another 'Robert Hod' who was imprisoned for stealing venison in the Forest of Rockingham in Northamptonshire in 1354. There are strong arguments against particular Robert Hods being the original of the legendary Robin Hood. The Rockingham thief, for example, is far too close in date to the first mention of Robin Hood in ballads in *Piers Plowman* in 1377 for there to have been time for the ballad stories to develop.

The Gloucestershire murderer is too geographically distant from the familiar settings Sherwood and Barnsdale to make him a likely candidate. However, there is a general argument against all of them in that, because of the limited nature of the records, there is no evidence to link any of them with the activities ascribed to Robin Hood in the earliest stories. Even Robert Hod/Hobbehod from the 1220s, who is specifically described as a 'fugitive' and who might seem the best of these candidates, cannot be directly connected with the traditional Robin. The evidence is simply not there and it is never likely to be.

This has not stopped writers regularly stepping forward with new theories about Robin Hood's identity. Nottingham author Jim Lees has suggested that Robert de Kyme, the elder son of a minor lord named William de Kyme, who was outlawed for robbery in the 1220s had a career that paralleled some of the events in the *Gest*. Unfortunately, Lees's ideas are severely compromised by his continued reliance, to some extent, on the long-discredited pedigree produced by William Stukeley in the 1740s. Lees believes that Stukeley was on to something; most Robin Hood scholars very definitely do not. Another author from the area most associated with the outlaw, Tony Molyneux-Smith, has come up with a theory that Robin Hood was not an individual but a pseudonym adopted by successive generations of the Folliott family from north Nottinghamshire. His book, *Robin Hood and the Lords of Wellow*, is a short and intriguing read but falls a long way short of proving his case.

Yet a further candidate who has come to the fore in recent years is Roger Godberd. Godberd was undoubtedly a medieval outlaw, a man who had served under Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham in 1265 and suffered as a consequence of being on the losing side. He also had connections with Nottingham and Sherwood Forest. As David Baldwin, Godberd's most persuasive advocate, writes in his 2010 book *Robin Hood: The English Outlaw Unmasked*, there are certainly 'several quite striking parallels between what is known of Roger Godberd's deeds and the earliest ballads'. One of the strengths of Baldwin's argument is that he makes no outrageous claims on its behalf. He does not state definitively that Godberd is the one and only real Robin. 'The character of Robin Hood,' he admits, 'has been drawn on many sources over the centuries (and continues to do so)' but, he continues, 'there are enough similarities to conclude that Roger's career lies at the heart of it.'

There has even been a recent theory that Robin was a Templar. Some unkind souls, when hearing of this, might be reminded of the quote from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* which states that a lunatic can always be identified, among other ways, 'by the fact that sooner or later he brings up the Templars' but, in fact, the case for Robin the Templar is not an unreasonable one. The argument, put forward in books like John Paul Davis's *Robin Hood: The Unknown Templar* is that Robin and his men, in the ballads, show many characteristics which suggest they are Templars escaped to the safety of the greenwood after the often-violent dissolution of the order in the first two decades of the fourteenth century. Like members of a Christian military religious order, the Merry Men combine piety with martial skills. They obey one master, Robin Hood, and the ballads indicate that most of them were outlawed together. None appears to be married and indeed women seem to play no part in their lives. Their robberies are designed not to profit themselves as individuals but to contribute to a common fund. They show kindness to one another and to the poor but also something approaching contempt for government officials and the richer members of the Church. Superficially the argument is quite appealing but it founders again on the rocky fact that there is no hard documentary evidence for a link between the theory and any of the ear-

stories of Robin Hood. In the unavoidable absence of this, all is speculation. To some, it may seem highly plausible speculation; to others, it is much less so. But it remains speculation. So do all the attempts to identify a real man behind the mask of Robin Hood. The mythical Robin, the Robin of books and films and computer games, lives on and shows few signs of ever dying. The real Robin, if he ever existed, has been sadly lost to history and there is very little likelihood that he will ever be rescued from time's oblivion.

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